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The Psychology of Time: When the Political Future is in the Past Not the Present

Editor

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Title: The Psychology of Time: When the Political Future is in the Past Not the Present

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To many Christians, life is based on the birth of a Jewish carpenter over 2,000 years ago. To many Muslims, the Word of Allah revealed to Muhammad, to a smaller number, also, the death of Muhammad's grandson Husayn ibn Ali in the Battle of Karbala, both over 1,300 years ago. Closer to the present, for two Khmer Rouge leaders, Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, convicted by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia of genocide, it's "Let bygones be bygones" and "...some quote-unquote fake history" (1). Then there are the 'comfort women' servicing Japanese soldiers during World War II, interpretations of which continue to impede strategic cooperation among leaders of Japan and the Republic of Korea (2). Finally, innumerable events affecting our lives and those of our ancestors, comprising atrocity, betrayal, sanctity, altruism, pleasure and pain. Sometimes, the consequence is enmeshment in the past, sometimes, people move on. All these and other such examples are political because they involve finite resources, infinite need, and competition to engage with both.

Modern scientific psychology has addressed the hold of the past on the present and future of individuals in a myriad of ways. There are cognitive-affective-behavioral therapies that may change the past and/or behaviors engendered from it (3). There are psychosexual and other developmental stage theories that identify what of the past might need to be better resolved (4). There are demonstrations of false confessions and memories which may be false, repressed, or recovered, as well as how they may be modified (5). And there are learning and re-learning models, often founded on the presence or absence of magnetic fields or direct electric current applied to the brain and current to other parts of the body seeming to change the perceived valence of situations and resulting behaviors (6).

Psychology has found confronting the past towards a more desirable present and future much more challenging with large human collectives. For example, collective memory research illustrates how the past has been used to defend various ideologies, the continuation of various intractable conflicts, and the stability of identities comprising the *essence before existence* allegedly typifying national, ethnic, and tribal groups (7). However, following Karl Marx's text from *Theses on Feuerbach* also engraved on his gravestone, "The *philosophers* have only *interpreted* the world...The point, however, is to *change* it" (8).

So, how to change collective memory? Psychology seems to be more involved with mechanisms of collective memory than change agents. For example, there are multi-layer models including the reciprocity of societal (collective representations, ideologies), group (social representations, narratives), and individual/inter-personal (remembering, meaning-making) processes (9). And the work of philosopher/social psychologist George H. Mead provides a conceptual infrastructure of a shared, dynamic language

amenable to change based on symbolic interactionism **(10)**. Finally, today's world of information operations seems to have focused on changing collective memory via fragmentation into key subpopulations each with its own desired echo chamber. Here the consequence may be more destruction of the collective and, thus, the collective memory.

However, we may still be left with *John 8:32*, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free". How will we know it? And what *past* will set us free?

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Keywords: Conflict. Information Operations. Propaganda. Psychological Operations.

Abstract/Description: This article illustrates one of political psychology's challenges--to change the hold of the past on the present and future of various human collectives in support of security and intelligence objectives.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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